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ABSTRACT

The plight of African American males has become a problem of alarming proportions in the United States. This paper reports serious disadvantage and risk for this group in terms of education, employment, poverty levels, family disintegration, criminal status, health, and death rates. The paper contends that the crisis for African American males must be addressed and resolved by persons of African descent and sensitive educators. Among proposed educational solutions are all-male classes and Rites of Passage programs. The paper includes an introduction and four main sections. The first section, "The Horrible Statistics," presents data on the marked disparities between African American and European American male prospects for successful educational and life outcomes. The second section, "Why All-Male Classes?" presents arguments for separating African American male students in special classes in order to improve academic achievement and self-esteem. The third section, "Models," describes the following all-male programs: (1) African American Immersion schools (Milwaukee, Wisconsin); (2) Ujamaa Institute (New York, New York); (3) Project 2000 (Morgan State University, Maryland); and (4) Rites of Passage programs in various communities. The fourth section, "Doing the Right Thing," presents seven strategies for parents and community for supporting and encouraging African American males. A list of 25 references is appended. (AF)

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AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES: LEAVING THE NIGHTMARE

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Introduction

African American males are losing in their efforts to grow and survive in the United States. Regardless of the index used, statistics indicate that African American males are suffering the most accute reactions from the inadequancies resultant from living in "the land of the free and the home of the brave." When compared to European-American groups, African American males show greater disparities in education, employment, poverty levels, family disintegration, criminal status, health and death rates. For African American males, to be born in and to live in America is becoming a nightmare. This crisis must be addressed and resolved by persons of African descent and sensitive educators. Education is the key with all-male classes and Rites of Passage programs being significant factors.

The plight of African American males has not been given the proper attention and thus has become a problem of alarming proportion. Louis W. Sullivan, Health and Human Services Secretary has said "To call these men an endangered species would be nothing but hyperbole." Nelson O. Onyenwoke, director for the Study of the Black Male at Albany State College (Georgia) has said that the term "black male crisis" is a misnomer. He says the crisis encompasses the African American family and the African American community, and

has long-term implications for society as a whole. Sullivan and Onyenwoke are among a growing number of individuals and groups convening local, regional and national meetings to focus on African American males. Some public schools, universities, African American community organizations, to include churches, and businesses are also working together to coordinate program activities focusing on African American males.

Frances Cress Welsing's Theory of Color-Confrontation states that the white or color deficient-Europeans responded psychologically with a profound sense of numerical inadequacy and color inferiority upon their confrontations with the massive majority of the world's people all of whom possesses varying degrees of color. The Negro race, who possesses the most amount of melanin, responsible for all skin coloration, has been the most oppressed. Because of slavery, colonization, racism and apartheid, it was necessary for Euro-Americans to create new images of Africans to justify that oppression.

Several African American psychologists have reasoned that the continued adoption by African Americans of the European reality orientation (i.e., a European self-consciousness) with its basic anti-African thrust suggest the growth of a serious condition of pathology in contemporary African American mental health. It is demonstrated mostly in African American males. Several African American psychologists have been pioneers in the development of an African-centered approach to modern psychology. Many of them feel that they must be about the liberation of the African mind from the self-destructive influences of European cosmology, and about its

placement back within the natural confines of its own reality structure.

The Horrible Statistics

No more gruesome statistic exists than the one from the Center for the Study of Social Policy in Washignton, DC. It predicts that 70 percent of working-age African American men will be jailed, dead, alcoholics or hooked on drugs by the year 2000. Many of the disfunctionale behaviors of African Americans in general society are established before they enter school and formal classroom settings. That is, there are some equations that can be made between the success of African Americans in U. S. society and programs and curriculums, learning styles, and African American socializations and traditional school settings. As a result, African Americans will not fare much better in general society than they will fare in traditional public school settings. With African American males, the disparities are even more pronounced.

According to the Joint Center for Political Studies, African Americans in public schools remain "largely isolated" and receive an inferior education, despite federal and state efforts to provide equal opportunities. Across the country, school districts report that African American males are disproportionately underachievers in reading and mathematics. The National Council of Advocates has reported severe disparities between African American and European-American school populations in terms of African American students classified as educable mentally retarded or slow learners, talented or gifted, and number of suspensions. African American males are disportionately represented when compared to other groups.

The huge employment gap remains between African Americans and European Americans, with the later being employed 2.2 times more according to the Urban League's report The State of Black America. There has been a decline in real income of African American males between the ages of 20 and 29 of 27.7 percent, compared to a 17.8 percent decline for all men says Northwestern Universitiy's Center for Labor Market Studies. One out of three African Americans lives at or below the poverty level, and children under 18 are represented at 45.6 percent according to a report issued by The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Almost six of ten African American families with children are headed by a single parent, many of them women.

The Sentencing Project, a non-profit research organization, reported the U.S. imprisons a larger share of its population than any other nation, followed by South Africa. The incarceration rate for African Americans is 3109 per 100,000 residents, or approximately seven times that of all U.S. residents. The incarceration rate for black South Africans is 729 per 100,000, or approximately twice that of white South Africans. According to the Department of Justice crime data reports, one of every four African American men is in jail or under court supervision. In fact, there are more men in their 20's under court control than there are African American men enrolled in college. Many of these men have drug related cases and involvement.

Homicide for African American men, ages 15 to 24, is the leading cause of death, and one of every three African American men, ages 20 to 24, is a homicide victim reports the Institute for

Advanced Study of Black Life. African American men in Harlem are less likely to reach 40 than young men living in Bangladash, one of the most poorest and overcrowded countries in the world. In 1987, Michigan was the most dangerous state for African American males with a death rate of 232 per 100,000, while North Carolina and Kentucky were considered the safest. Homicide is a large and important health problem according to Dr. James Mercy of the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta and is now so classified.

The National Center for Health Statistics and The Institute for Advanced Study of Black Family Life reported the following: African American men, when compared to the general population suffer higher death rates (68 percent), more strokes (90 percent), have more cancer (71 percent), more liver ailments (126 percent), more diabetes (86 percent), and most significantly African American males account for one of every four AIDS cases nationwide. As a result, the life expectancy of African American males is down from 69.7 percent to 69.4 percent, while for European Americans it is up from 75.3 to 75.4.

Why All-Male Classes?

One of the most controversial issues to emerge in recent years is the idea of separating African American male students into special classes in order to improve academic achievement and self-esteem. The issue is being intensely debated among educators more concerned about the perception, sociolization and cultural learning styles of African American boys prior to the fourth grade, or 8-10 years of age, and those ascribing to more traditional ways. The educational system has yet to recognize the roots, culture and

learning styles of African American children to any significant degree.

In school, factors most determinant of student achievement are, perhaps, the use of curricular and learning styles that do not reflect the needs of African American students and expectation levels set by classroom teachers. The present Euro-centric curriculum is designed to favor students who process information in a logical, sequential, linear, judgemental fashion. However, some studies indicate that most non-white students are whole concept learners and process information in an abstract, non-sequential, non-linear style. Non-white students also appear to be more comfortable when they are engaged in groups investigation, small group activity, role playing, simulation and on-site learning experiences.

The fate of many African American children is linked to how they perceive themselves and their life-choices. Barbara Long, a professor of education at the University of Massachusetts uses the term "internalized oppression." It is the guilt, shame, fear and feelings of inferiority that have been programmed --consciously and unconsciously, overtly and covertly-- into the psyche over the generations. A look at racial stereotypes and how they have been portrayed since slavery is dramatically illustrated in Ethnic Notions, the highly acclaimed videotape produced by the University of California.

Robert Staples, professor of sociology at the University of California at San Francisco, believes there are some drawbacks in understanding the dynamics of African American cultural behavior.

According to Staples, whereas the kinship and peer group socialize the African American child into African American folkways, mainstream culture is largely transmitted through external agencies such as television and schools. Janice Hale argues in her book, Black Children: Their Roots, Culture, and Learning Styles, that much of mainstream culture is in conflict with African American culture and cannot be easily integrated without some personality dislocation.

Some evidence is beginning to surface indicating that boys learn better when they are not competing with each other, as researced by Charles Riordan ("Girls and Boys in School"). In the early grades, girls are more mature. They are accustomed to sitting still longer, coming when they are called, identifying with a positive role model (their mother). When questions are asked, they are the first to raise their hands and communicated more effectively with the women who make up most of the teaching staff and administration in virtually all elementary schools.

Models

Milwaukee's two new all male African American Immersion schools are scheduled to open in September, 1991. Enrollment will be voluntary; girls and non-African Americans now attending the school will have the option of transferring or staying. Although the school's curriculum will be "multicultural" rather than "Afrocentric," lessons will stress persons of African descent. Males teachers --African Americans in particular-- will be asked to volunteer for the schools. Each child enrolled in the school will be paired with an adult mentor for one hour each day.

The mentors will be a staff member or a community volunteer.

The needs of African American and Hispanic males are being addressed in New York City in a proposal to create an alternative high school called the Ujamaa Institute (the Swahili for "familyhood.") The school, scheduled to open in September, 1991, will be located on the campus of Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn. The program of studies would be based around the theme of the family in an attempt to instill the values of responsibility and caring. The curriculum would be Afri-Centered, that is, the experiences of African and African American people would become the perspective by which culture is viewed.

Project 2000 is a comprehensive mentoring program that operates out of the Center for Educating African American Males (CEAAM) at Morgan State University's (MD) School of Education and Urban Studies. Dr. Stanley Holland, director of the center, says Project 2000's initial goal is to provide positive male role models in the daily school life of inner-city African American boys. Holland says that in societies where there are very formal rites of passage, it is the group of men in the society that takes that group of boys into manhood. Holland emphasizes that in African societies, it is the bonding of age peers that is the primary bond in the society.

African American men's and community organizations across the country are becoming more involved in the "Rites of Passage" programs. The Rites of Passage is an African centered, formal socialization process designed to help Afrikan American male

children make a more meaningful transition from boyhood to adolescence to manhood. Whenever possible, boys of the same age go through the rites process together. In the process, young boys learn to have a better understanding and appreciation of the language, history, values, rituals, and traditions of Afrikan and Afrikan American people.

Developed by Dr. Kwabena Faheem Ashanti, The Ashanti Brainwashing Test and the Ashanti Africentric KBO Model have demonstrated the need for an Afrocentric focus and male bonding in older African American male students. The Ashanti Brainwashing Test was given to 400 students, from eighth grade students to seniors in college. It demonstrated that many students do not excel academically, and psychologically, until they learn and practice their own culture first. The KBO Model was designed as an academic and social support program for upperclass African American male students at the University of North Carolina. Although the model is still in the formative stages, program participants are showing gains in the seven program areas: physical, psychological, spiritual, academic, cultural, civic and career planning.

Doing the Right Thing

Although quite general in scope, the following strategies are offered to African Americans in an effort to dilute and eventually negate the disparities that exist between African American men and white Americans, both in school and the general society.

1. All Africans must focus on a positive self-worth/self-image/self-ideal that is based on African culture and heritage.

2. Parents must not be indifferent to education but must look upon themselves as their children's primary teachers.

3. Parents must focus on raising their children by being conscientious of their role as models.

4. All adults should become involved with at least one community or civil rights organization.

5. African American churches must begin to put the African back in church, bring religion out of the sky, and show how good nehavior can be used for growth and survival.

6. Parents and community organizations must come together to press school boards for the use of relevant curriculums and the use of appropriate learning styles.

7. Individals and African American organizations must encourage sensitive white Americans to set good examples in race relations for other white Americans.

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